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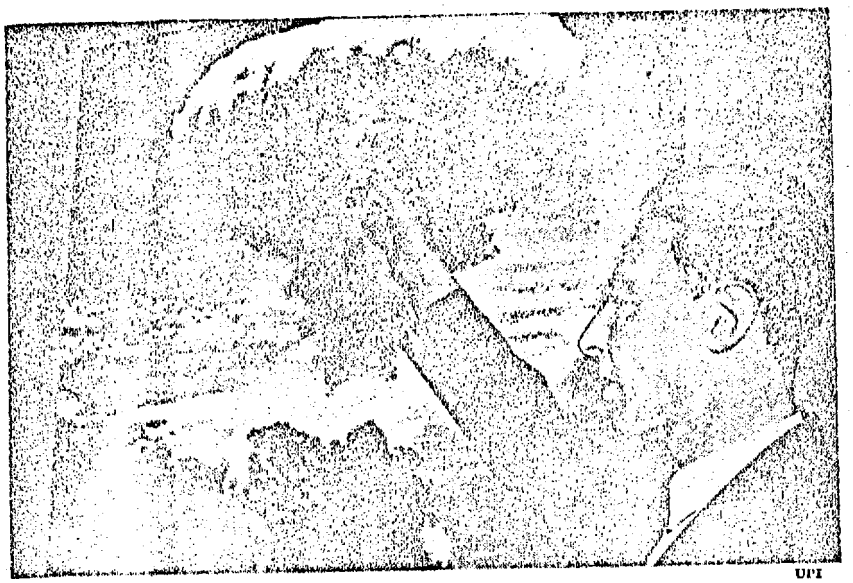
BOOKS



UPI

Oppenheimer in 1946: Would he have revealed America's secrets?

Ritual of Expiation

THE OPPENHEIMER CASE: SECURITY ON TRIAL. *By Philip M. Stern. With the collaboration of Harold P. Green. 591 pages. Harper & Row. $10.*

The curriculum vitae can be collapsed into a few sentences: J. Robert Oppenheimer (1904-1967) was graduated summa cum laude from Harvard, studied in Europe, returned to this country from Leiden so brilliantly versed in the new quantum mechanics that his teaching shifted the base of theoretical physics from Europe to the United States. After Pearl Harbor he became director of the atomic-energy laboratory at Los Alamos and his work there had as its climax the first atomic explosion, the Trinity Test, at Alamogordo a month before Hiroshima. After the war he advised the government on atom research till 1952, opposed the development of the hydrogen bomb, became director of Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study. In 1954, after a four-week security hearing contemporaneous with the Army-McCarthy hearings, he was stripped of his right of access to secret information.

Philip Stern's book examines in exhaustive detail the aspects of Oppenheimer's history and personality that cost him his good name; it picks apart the legal and moral ramifications of the hearing; it provides a summary of government security policies and concludes that they are both immoral and useless. The author's sympathies are overwhelmingly with Oppenheimer, but he carefully documents the great physicist's failings: his arrogance, political ignorance, occasional mendacity and irregular judgments.

Both the man and the case against him have provoked violent debates. At the center of the arguments that swept around him was the crucial matter of atomic policy and technology. Oppenheimer favored the conventional fission bomb. His opponents—Edward Teller, Ernest Lawrence, Lewis L. Strauss (chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission during the hearings)—favored development of a fusion, or hydrogen, bomb. Fission and fusion are metaphors for Oppenheimer's explosive history.

Lax: The charges against him in 1954 were various, but among them the most ambiguous was his opposition to the H-bomb. Stern shows that many scientists opposed it more vigorously than Oppenheimer; since he "had been standing in a crowd, why did the lightning single him out?" The other charges looked to his history rather than his opinions: that he was before the war a Communist (he probably was not); that both before and during the war, he took his friends from the ranks of Communists and ex-Communists (Oppenheimer admitted as much); that he was lax in regard to security (not even his most vehement critics concluded that he gave away secrets, either by accident or design); that he lied to security officers (he did).

In 1943 Haakon Chevalier approached his close friend Oppenheimer and told him that a British scientist was anxious to transmit American war secrets to the Russians. Oppenheimer failed to tell security officers of the conversation for eight months, and when he did he lied to them about its details. Why? Because, Oppenheimer said, "I was an idiot." But in 1954 the Chevalier story was very old news indeed.

For Stern, the question of Oppenheimer's loyalty can be reduced to one simple question: would he have revealed America's secrets to her enemies? If not, why was he punished and humiliated? Because, concludes Stern, of his failure to support the H-bomb program with suitable enthusiasm. The security hearing was an act of consummate ingratitude toward a dedicated national servant, and it deprived the United States of a supremely valuable national resource.

Blacklist: After summarizing the worst absurdities of loyalty tests, and after warning against the dangers of putting security files in the hands of the irresponsible, and after citing the current charges that scientists are being blacklisted by the Department of Health, Education and Welfare for their political opinions, Stern concludes that we should abolish all tests of loyalty except one: will the man betray secrets? He does not suggest how such a likelihood might be predicted, and with his failure to do so his suggestion falls apart.

The re-creation of the Oppenheimer case has become what amounts to a national ritual of expiation. We have today, besides Stern's book, Heinar Kipphardt's fine play "In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer"—which uses most of the same official records and leads to many of the same conclusions. But finally the matter of loyalty—to science, friends, nation or to humanity—is deeply personal and singular. Oppenheimer's particular case provokes from Stern great indignation, but it is not a matter, finally, on which a persuasive theory of national policy can be erected.

—GEOFFREY WOLFF